

[Interview with Elfego Baca]

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7/13/36 - cl-2,000 INTERVIEW WITH ELFEGO BACA

"I never wanted to kill anybody," Elfego Baca told me, "but if a man had it in his mind to kill me, I made it my business to get him first."

Elfego Baca belongs to the six-shooter epoch of American history. Those were the days when hard-shooting Texas cowboys invaded the territory of New Mexico, driving their herds of longhorns over the sheep ranges of the New Mexicans, for whom they had little liking or respect. Differences were settled quickly, with few words and a gun. Those were the days of Billy the Kid, with whom Elfego, at the age of seventeen, made a tour of the gambling joints in Old Albuquerque. In the words of Kyle Crichton, who wrote Elfego Baca's biography, "the life of Elfego Baca makes Billy the Kid look like a piker." Harvey Ferguson calls him "a knight-errant from the romantic point of view if ever the six-shooter West produced one."

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And yet Mr. Baca is not a man who lives in his past.

"I wonder what I can tell you," he said when I asked him for pioneer stories. "I don't remember so much about those things now. Why don't you read the book Mr. Crichton wrote about me?"

He searched about his desk and brought out two newspaper clippings of letters he had written recently to the Albuquerque Journal on local politics. The newspaper had deleted two of the more outspoken paragraphs. Mr. Baca was annoyed.

I tried to draw Mr. Baca away from present day politics to stories of his unusual past, but he does not talk readily about himself, although he seemed anxious to help me. Elfego Baca is a kindly courteous gentleman who is concerned to see that his visitor has the coolest spot in the room.

2

He brought out books and articles that had been written about him, but he did not seem inclined to reminiscing and answered my questions briefly. "Crichton tell tells about that in his book" or "Yes, I knew Billy the Kid."

Finally I asked him at random if he knew anything about the famous old Manzano Gang which I had frequently seen mentioned in connection with Torrance County.

He replied that he broke up that gang when he was Sheriff of Socorro County.

"There were ten of them," he said, "and I got nine. The only reason I didn't get the other one was that he got over the border and was shot before I got to him. They used to go to a place near Belen and empty the freight cars of grain and one thing and another. Finally they killed a man at La Jolla. Contreros was his name. A very rich man with lots of money in his house, all gold. I got them for that. They were all convicted and sent to the Pen."

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Mr. Baca settled back in his chair and made some remark about the late Senator Cutting whose photograph stood on his desk.

I persisted about the Manzano Gang. "I wish you'd tell me more about that gang. How you got them, and the whole story."

"Well," he said, "after that man Contreros was shot, they called me up at my office in Socorro and told me that he was dying. I promised to get the murderers in forty-eight hours. That was my rule. Never any longer than forty-eight hours."

Mr. Baca suspected certain men, but when a telephone call to Albuquerque established the fact that they had been in that city at the time of the killing, his next thought was of the Manzano Gang.

Accompanied by two men, he started out on horseback in the direction of La Jolla.

3

Just as the sun was rising; they came to the ranch of Lazaro Cordova. They rode into the stable and found Cordova's son-in-law, Prancasio Saiz already busy with his horse.

"Good morning," said Elfego, "what are you doing with your horse so early in the morning?"

Saiz replied that he was merely brushing him down a little.

Mr. Baca walked over and placed his hand on the saddle. It was wet inside. The saddle blanket was steaming. He looked more closely at the horse. At first sight it had appeared to be a pinto, white with brown spots. Mr. Baca thought he remembered that Saiz rode a white horse.

"What happened to that horse?" he asked.

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The man replied that the boys had had the horse out the day before and had painted the spots on him with a kind of berry that makes reddish-brown spots. "Just for a joke," he added.

"Where's your father-in-law?" asked Mr. Baca.

Saiz said that his father-in-law had gone the day before to a fiesta at La Jolla and had not returned.

"I understand you're a pretty good shot," said Sheriff Baca. "You'd better come along, and help me round up some men I'm after for the killing of Contreros in La Jolla."

Saiz said that he had work to do on the ranch, but at the insistence of Mr. Baca, he saddled his horse and rode out with the three men.

"About as far as from here to the station," went on Mr. Baca, "was a graveyard where the gang was supposed to camp out. I rode over to it and found where they had lunched the day before. There were sardin sardine cans and cracker boxes and one thing and another. Then I found where one of them had had a call to nature. I told one of my men to put it in a can. Saiz didn't know about this, and in a little while he went over behind some mesquite 4 bushes and had a call to nature. After he came back I sent my man over, and by God it was the same stuff — the same beans and red chili seeds! So I put Saiz under arrest and sent him back to the jail at Socorro with one of my deputies, although he kept saying he couldn't see what I was arresting him for."

Mr. Baca and his other deputy proceeded in the direction of La Jolla. Before long they saw a man on horseback coming toward them.

"He was running that horse like everything. When we met I saw that he was a Texan. Doc Something or other was his name. I can't remember now. But he was a pretty tough man."

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"You a Sheriff?" he said to Mr. Baca.

"No," replied Mr. Baca, "no, I'm not a Sheriff. Don't have nothing to do with the law, in fact.

"You're pretty heavily armed," remarked the man suspiciously.

"I generally arm myself this way when I go for a trip in the country," answered Baca, displaying his field glasses. "I think it's safer."

"Well, if you want fresh horses, you can get them at my ranch, a piece down the road," said the Texan.

Mr. Baca figured that this was an attempt to throw him off the trail, so as soon as the Texan was out of sight, he struck out east over the mountains for Manzano. Just as he was entering the village he saw two of the gang coming down the hill afoot leading their horses. He placed them under arrest and sent them back to Socorro with his other deputy.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when Mr. Baca passed the Cordova ranch again on his way back. He roused Lazaro Cordova, who had returned from La Jolla by that time, and told him to dress and come with him to Socorro.

"The old man didn't want to come," said Mr. Baca, "and kept asking 5 'what you want with me anyhow?' I told him that he was under arrest, and on the way to Socorro I told him that unless he and his son-in-law came across with a complete statement about the whole gang, I would hang both of them, for I had the goods on them and knew all right that they were both in on the killing of Contreros. I put him in the same cell with his son-in-law, and told him it was up to him to bring Saiz around. They came through with the statement. I kept on catching the rest of the gang, until I had them all. All but the one who got himself shot before I caught up with him."

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"If you ever go to Socorro you ask Billy Newcomb, the Sheriff down there now to show you the records. You might see the place on the way down where they buried a cowboy I shot. It's a little way off the main road though.

"That was a long time before I was a real Sheriff. In those days I was a self-made deputy. I had a badge I made for myself, and if they didn't believe I was a deputy, they'd better believe it, because I made 'em believe it."

"I had gone to Escondida a little way from Socorro to visit my uncle. A couple of Texas cowboys had been shooting up the town of Socorro. They hadn't hurt anybody that time. Only frightened some girls. That's the way they did in those days — ride through a town shooting at dogs and cats and if somebody happened to get in the way — powie! — too bad for him. The Sheriff came to Escondida after them. By that time they were making a couple of Mexicans dance, shooting up the ground around their feet. The Sheriff said to me 'Baca, if you want to help, come along, but there's going to be shooting.'"

"We rode after them and I shot one of them about three hundred yards away. The other got away — too many cottonwood trees in the way.

6

"Somebody asked me what that cowboy's name was. I said I didn't know. He wasn't able to tell me by the time I caught up with him."

I asked what the Sheriff's name was, and when Mr. Baca said it was Pete Simpson, I said, "The one you were electioneering for the time of the Frisco affair when you held off about 80 cowboys for over 36 hours." This is the one of Mr. Baca's exploits that has been most frequently written about.

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"Hell, I wasn't electioneering for him," he said. "I don't know where they got that idea. I couldn't have made a speech to save my life. And I didn't wear a Prince Albert coat either. They didn't have such things in this country in those days."

"Is it true that you ate dinner afterward with French and some other men who had been shooting at you, and talked the affair over," I asked.

"I ate dinner with some men afterward but I don't remember who they were now. I don't think that man French was there at all, although he must have been in the neighborhood, as he seemed to know all about it. But I don't remember him. Jim Cook was one that was shooting at me though. He was a pretty tough man, but he came near getting it."

He showed me a photograph which Jim Cook had sent him recently. The picture showed an old man who still looks as though he could not be easily trifled with. It was inscribed "To Elfego Baca in memory of that day at Frisco."

"Did you see the letter that Englishman wrote to Crichton? He wanted to hang me. 'Why don't you hang that little Mexican so-and-so?' he asked. I said, 'Why don't you be the one to do it?' and pulled my guns, and woo, he wasn't so eager. You know I surrendered only on condition that I keep my guns. They placed six guards over me, but they rode 25 steps ahead of 7 me all the way to Socorro.

"Those were great old days. Everything is very quiet now, isn't it?" said Mr. Baca looking up. "I think I'll run for something this fall, but I don't know what yet."